

### Joe Christmas's Identity Dilemma in William Faulkner's *Light in August*

Hussein Nasir Shwein Al-Khazali,  
Department of English Language, College of Arts, University of Al-Qadisiyah,  
Iraq

#### Abstract

The war had a critical impact throughout the history of the USA on the conquered South, which was undergoing "collective decline" leading to a "collective cultural trauma". The concept of trauma is inseparably associated with the South's ideologies, specifically the ideology of white superiority in the South. The present study investigates the role of traumatic life events on identity in *Light in August*. Joe Christmas, the protagonist in William Faulkner's novel, is portrayed as a trauma survivor on a never-ending quest for identification. Also, this study is an attempt to examine how the identity of Joe Christmas is formed by the collective identity of his community. Joe Christmas who is always in search of identity wishes to be a tragic character. He combats all the threats to physical, intellectual and emotional safety through violent reactions that generally occur in explosions against women because he intimately threatens his understanding of his sexuality. Joe Christmas, associating himself with the black race at many points within the novel, suffers from the mockery that entails only because he knows a bit about his personal story and enables his racial confusion to influence his sexual identity in his teenage years and adulthood. This study analyses how Christmas challenges, heightens and exacerbates Jefferson's racial and sex-based stringent classifications. In this paper, Faulkner is undoubtedly disengaged from portraying the terrible representation of the injury by which his mulatto character experiences "Trauma Process ". In this respect, it is revealed that collective injuries are related to the collective character of America. It successively reflects the entire destructive vision of the South that is represented in Faulkner's novel.

**Keywords:** Individual Identity, Racism, Outcast, Marginalized, Prejudice, Trauma

The novel *Light in August* is told from the point of view of the town, through the gossiping of Jefferson's residents. It is primarily about two strangers who arrive in Jefferson at different times: Joe Christmas as a biracial man among the Jefferson people, and a young Alabama pregnant woman who looks for a child's father. Even though they come from different backgrounds, their search for fate is universal. The majority of the chapters in the novel reveal the past, which is the primary cause of their present lives and ultimately leads to their tragic fate.

Faulkner begins the novel's character descriptions through Lena's story in which he introduces Joe Christmas, another significant character. Visser indicates that the story of Lena and Joe is intertwined in Joe's introduction. At the planning mill, a man who seems to be a foreigner appears out of nowhere. He remains an outsider to everyone at the mill until Joe Brown, a newcomer, shows up and introduces himself as a friend. Because her parents fought for the freedom of black people who were enslaved by whites, they are staying in Miss. Joanna Burden's cabin, which is located outside of town. He is a complicated character. Faulkner first reveals his true identity in the darkness of the night, at the cabin where he has a good relationship with her, however he is frequently haunted by hallucinations that render him unconscious. Since he is biracial, he is haunted by his past, which consists of the incidents that occurred throughout his life. Joe is aware that she's furious at Joanna when she forces him to pray and asks him to work for black children in the school, etc. but he's completely unaware of his actions. In this instance, he is caught in a dilemma by Joanna's death. While

holding the weapons, he suddenly realizes that he shot Joanna and the gun had two bullets, one for her and the other for himself. Then he confronts his dilemma: He's a murderer of Joanna, and he doesn't know what his future holds. He starts searching for his fate. His turbulent past does not cut him a break, so he moves from place to place to avoid the cops. This may explain why he is put into the cabin with the black blood, and the white blood holds him out. "But his blood would not be quiet, let him save it. It would not be either one or the other and let his body save itself. His black blood drove him first to the negro cabin. And then the white blood drove him out of there, as it was the black blood which snatched up the pistol and the white blood which would not let him fire it" (86).

Joe Christmas is starting to resemble Tom Jones from Henry Fielding's novel *Tom Jones*. All he hears are voices from invisible black people surrounded him, like body voices that murmur, speak and laugh at him in a language that he does not understand. His instinctive behaviour is not what he wants to be. When he comes across a group of black people on the road in the middle of the night, he is afraid of losing his identity. He despises black because it reminds him of his inner aversion to himself. Joe's crucial past is further exemplified by Faulkner's use of the stream of consciousness technique (Ahmed, N. H. M. and Ahmed, M. A.). At first, he is known as Joe Christmas because he was abandoned as a baby in an orphanage on Christmas Day by his grandfather. In the orphanage, though other children are similar to him, he is completely alone. The only difference between him and the other kids is his race. In most cases, the child is emotionally bound to the mother, but this is a crisis in the case of Joe. He has no one in the orphanage who loves him, and he is mistreated by the dietician, who despises him and makes others angry because he is biracial. He was often referred to as a "little nigger bastard" by her. So Joe believes that an orphanage is a terrifying place where he can't relax and is brutally treated by people who are all white supremacists. He is then thrown without mercy out of an orphanage.

Second, he is permitted to remain with his adoptive parents. He is overjoyed when he first enters the new home, but then he sees his parents, Mr. and Mrs. McEachern, for the first time. His wife becomes his slave after he makes a blunder in learning the catechism, a religious book. His mother loves him, but her actions such as hiding money in his room and taking good care of him after he was beaten by her husband irritate him, and he believes she has lost faith in him.

In his "Trauma Process", Faulkner depicts an appalling representation of injury experienced by his mulatto character. An attempt will be made to argue that collective injuries are related to the American South's collective character. This, in turn, echoes Faulkner's depiction of the South as a global destroyer in his book.

The glorious South's image was shattered after the war, and it was portrayed as a myth that could never be realized because it had become a mere recollection of the South's history (Singal 168). As a result of the distorted image of Glory, a cultural trauma occurs that is irreversible. According to Jeffrey, this "occurs when members of a collectively feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (1). The defeat was traumatic in this sense because it left an enormous impact on the mentality of Southerners who were devastated by the defeat, resulting in division of the South into Old and New. This misery was also shared because it shattered major bonds and harmed people's sense of community (Jeffrey 4). Indisputably, the trauma hypothesis is significantly related to the ideologies embodied in the South,

particularly white people Southern philosophy. In his novel, Faulkner tries to talk with his hero Joe Christmas as a trauma victim on an endless journey. Kuo says a trauma victim represents and takes place in the seed of his dying consciousness (3).

Joe, who seems white but is suspected of having black blood, confronts his racial reality severely by the racists he encounters. This reality follows him throughout his life and haunts him in many ways leading to his paradoxical nature. As a matter of fact, he felt socially repelled since the Southern community "[was] avenging its traumatic past upon the recently offended other subjects within" (Kuo 133). Joe had a traumatic experience in the orphanage when he stole toothpaste from the dietician's chamber. He witnessed the dietician's intimate interaction one day while he was hiding and chewing toothpaste. He was watching her while eating toothpaste, but the excess toothpaste in his mouth caused him to vomit, and he was spotted by the woman who tormented him with the phrase "nigger bastard" (Faulkner 114). Although he never acts like a nigger or a white man, these statements cause him to have an identity crisis (Faulkner 349). This is a bitter memory that is difficult to handle as well as reminding him of the South racial pain. Joe is also traumatized by his grandfather, Doc Hines. Because of his father's mixed racial roots, this guy regards his grandchild as a "devil's crop" (Faulkner 379). Since Hines is motivated by Puritan beliefs, he murders Joe's father and lets his daughter Milly die during delivery by denying her medical care. He exacerbates Joe's unsettled identity by working as a janitor in the orphanage and staying close to him in order to monitor and despise him (Faulkner 127). This character embodies the Southern way of thought and their contempt for the black race regard as a "walking pollution in God's face" (Faulkner 128). His abominable actions all contribute to the child's anguish, such as the abandonment of the young child at an orphanage and outweighing racial prejudice against his grandson from an early age. Trauma, Cathy Caruth says, is "an overpowering experience of unexpected and catastrophic occurrences in which the response to the incident manifests itself in the frequently delayed, uncontrollable, recurring appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Kuo 24). Taking this definition into account, it is revealed that Joe as a child suffered a series of "catastrophically occurrences," including the loss of both of his parents, being abandoned at the orphanage as well as ongoing direct exposure to racial epithets that bothered him.

He starts with an assessment of his relationship with this Janitor as a trauma victim trying to sense all those traumatic events, and later he becomes his grandfather. In the following lines of the novel, the author interposes the views of Doc Hinas with the eyes of a child. "Even at three years of age; the child knew that there was something between them [...] if the child had been older he would perhaps have thought he hates me and fears me [...] that is why I am different from the others: because he is watching me all the time. He accepted it". (Faulkner 137-138)

However, these words represent Hines' intrinsic conduct towards him and acknowledges its contradictory nature. The child's disappointment and failure to see Hines's outbreak is obvious. As a result, Joe's initial reaction is revealed through exchanges portraying his fascination with the dark race and his distinguishing proof with them. In the end, the debate appears to be about his turbulence and the fact that he is portrayed as a victim of an injury. In his perception and conversation with a dark specialist at the shelter, his response is, "How come you are nigger? And the nigger said who told you I am a nigger, you little trash bastard? And [Joe] says I ain't a nigger and the nigger says you are worse than that. You don't know what you are. And more than that, you won't [sic] know. You'll live and you'll die and you won't [sic] know" (383-384).

Although Joe's unseen blackness at the heart of his trauma is revealed in the words above, they also expose the boy's ongoing search for identity is as absurd as it enhances his pain as he delves deeper into his origins. Personal adversity, according to Jeffrey, is a psychological assault that penetrates one's barriers so quickly and with such severe power that one is unable to respond properly. The identification of Joe, which challenges classifications, agitates cities because it is contrary to the rigid classification of Jefferson's identification: "for the black, he appears white" "for the white town folk, he appears to be of mulatto origin" (Faulkner 139). The unstable identity of the Mulatto justifies the lack of trauma. Further, it justifies that there is no fixed location for trauma. "Trauma is not lockable in the simple violent or original occurrence in an individual's past [...] but rather in the way, it was precisely unknown in the first instance," says Jeffrey, who later comes back to haunt the survivor" (7). Joe Christmas' traumatic experience is linked to a blood theory. This means that his white blood occasionally makes him white. Because of his light skin, he is able to successfully pull off the stunt, go to a white barbershop, dress as a white man, and no one questions him because he looks like a white man (Faulkner 349).

He also starts fighting when he wants to be identified as a black person, duping or baiting white people into labelling against him as an Afro-American so he can fight them (Faulkner 225). He gradually loses respect for his guardians and begins to live his life according to his desires. When he tries to stop his father's off-base activities such as drinking, betting, and having a relationship with the server Bobbie Allen, he beats him over the head with the chair one day. He then goes to Bobbie's house, where he is taunted by a man who punches him repeatedly, demanding to know whether his blood is dark or white. Then, he drifts away from that place, meandering from town to town until he arrives at the place known as Jefferson. He was disciplined as a child, and he never received maternal warmth because he lost his mother, and as a result, he doubts women and their supporting temperament. Joe's life comes to an end at the hands of Percy Grimm, who assassinates him for the murder of Joanna. Finally, white society succeeds in killing him physically, spiritually, and psychologically. "It seemed to him that he could see himself being haunted by white men, at last, the black abyss which had been waiting, trying for thirty years to drown him and into which now, at last, he had entered" (366).

Faulkner clearly emphasizes the power of race, specifically the white race, over black people in the southern United States through the character of Joe Christmas. People in his neighbourhood tease him because he is biracial, even though he appears to be white. People's minds cannot be determined by their skin colour, but it can only be determined by their character and not by their skin colour.

Joe's rage and hatred for women is manifested in various ways as a consequence of the traumatic memorial events started at the site of the toothpaste incident, including prostitutes Bobbie Allen and Joanna Burden. His meeting with Bobbie Allen had torments him due to the fact that he was cruelly abandoned as a child. Joe is an abandoned neurotic person who worries about being loved as he is (Fanon 77). He sexually assaults her after discovering she is on her period. Menstruation brings back memories of his visit to the dietician's office and the events that ensued. Joe imagines a shrinking row of suavely shaped urns in the moonlight after learning about menstruation, and one might notice the role of memory in producing trauma in this context. Since none of them are ideal, erupted liquid, causes him to vomit (Faulkner 189). Since a victim dreams about and imaginatively returns to the traumatic event, it is clear that traumatic memory is unconsciously torturing Joe Christmas (Forter 267). "Vomiting" Greg Forter's new book, is about the experience of

sexual trauma. Vomiting, according to Forter, has something to do with identity formation and represents a "strangely elusive identity" because a substance is alluded to that is assimilated and rejected at the same time. Joanna Burden is the victim of Joe Christmas's sexual trauma. This woman's self-presentation in her dual personality is similar to Joe's (Faulkner 235).

Joanna Burden oscillates between two sexual characteristics: male and female. Like Joe, she suffers from racial trauma. She also has a hand that is better suited to holding a rope, a gun butt, or a knife than a pen (Faulkner 242). Her grandfather's abolitionist promises to protect black people heavily weighs on her shoulders. Joe Christmas does rapes this woman several times to vent his sexual angst. In fact, rape, gives Joe a feeling of superiority and control over the white female body. According to Alicia Hickman's essay "An Analysis of Race and Gender in *Light in August*", Joe rapes Joanna to show his black masculinity dominance to be able to be with a pure white girl (19).

Since being black equates to having feminine characteristics, rape is intended to help him overcome his inferiority complex (Forter 272). Miss Burden, on the other hand, questions Joe's identity by inverting his gender roles in their sexual relationship and making him feminine. Joanna's manly power, which regularly defies Joe's gender norms, puts his manhood in jeopardy (Bush 490). For example, she reacts passively to Joe's aggression: "Now she'll run," Joe predicts. However, "she did not flee. She didn't put up a lot of resistance" (Faulkner 236). As Bush postulates, Joanna's passivity turns "real rape" into "imitative rape" (484). It's imitative not only because of the controller shift but also because the entire thing becomes a game: "It was as if she'd devised the whole thing only to play it out like a play" (Faulkner 259).

Rather than have anyone, another man understands what their relationship had become, he could have died or been murdered (Faulkner 271). Joe's trauma is initiated by his paradoxical connection with Joanna Burden, which is famous for its subversive structure, and it is not only race but also gender trauma. Joe Christmas, like a trauma victim who "may more or less simultaneously rely on, for example, denial, blaming, or scapegoating others" (Smelser 45). To end his gender trauma, Joe decapitates Joanna with a razor. In short, *Light in August*'s portrayal of trauma reveals the tragic journey of Joe Christmas's trauma process. The novel's conclusion adds to Joe's tragic sense of identity by revealing that in retaliation for Joanna's murder, Percy Grimm castrates Joe with a butcher knife. Even in death, Joe's gender is questioned, as evidenced by the following incident; "The pent black seemed to rush like a releasing breath. It seemed to rush out his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket, upon that black blast that man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever" (Faulkner 465).

Joe's death resembles menstrual blood, as does the dark blood that runs from Christmas. As John N. Duvall asserts, the black blood that oozes from Christmas's hips and loins is menstrual blood (Tamura 39). Christmas's bleeding is caused by his sexual organs, just like a woman's menstruation period. Duvall also considers the emotions of men to the mutilation scene. He mentions that Joe's vomiting after learning about Bobbie Allen is a replay of his vomiting before knowing about menstruation (Tamura 39).

In conclusion, this study is an attempt to investigate trauma and Identity in *Light in August* as an apocalyptic text. Referring to Bull's definition of these concepts, Hoefer states that "bivalence is the result of a fractured existence and incomplete knowledge." (12). The



novel delves into the contradictory concepts of blackness and whiteness. The inner contradiction and trauma of Joe Christmas's psyche are revealed through such contrasts. According to the abovementioned analysis, Faulkner's extreme obsession with the Southern myth and regional traumatic intensity can be grasped in his fiction. It is developed in both social and psychological contexts (Hunninghausen 190). Consequently, the Southern trauma stems from the conflict between the apocalyptic modernity and the post war traumatic past (Kuo 134). As ISHIKAWA notes, Joe Christmas was subjected to the cruelty of racism when he was still in his mother's womb. His grandfather, a white supremacist, lets his daughter die in childbirth because she bears the "devil's crop" and a black Mexican child. Then, the child is constantly teased by others, leading him to believe that he is incapable of dealing with his problems because he has been insulted since childhood. Every child is born to the earth with a meaningful purpose in life and a duty to fulfil, but the white supremacist condemns this helpless child (William Faulkner).

They are concerned about his blood because his father, despite his appearance, is black. These types of violation demonstrate lack of humanity towards black people in this town. They even make black people feel humiliated by treating them with contempt and refusing to recognize them as human beings. This is while, Joe's grandfather lives among black people and receives food and shelter from them.

Because of his erratic attitude towards life, Joe misplaced his life. He has no chance to live with friendly people, and he is not prepared to be accepted by them as he believes that if somebody shows affection, he is bribed for something. In addition, he acutely knows how important it is to keep his biracial identity under wraps. He could be both black and white, so he does not need to be loyal to anyone, though it seems attractive to be white.

Lena, a surrendered young woman, is killed. She always looks over Byron as a strange man who doesn't seem to care about his own life. He seems to be a man who does everything for his job and takes advantage of the lives of others for money, which is his life's aim. He quickly abandons her as soon as he becomes aware that she is pregnant (Brooks). She moves to Jefferson until she gives birth to her child. She cannot find Joe, so she quits the town with her companion Byron Bunch, who is honest and good-natured to the extent that he represses his love for her. They keep looking for the mysterious man. Both Joe and Lena are guiltless, and they set out their journey in search of fate, though they fail in their attempt (Brooks).

## **Conclusion**

This paper examines Faulkner's *Light in August* as one of the most significant literary works about racism and human precepts. This novel which was written during the time of racial segregation, depicts the South of the United States focusing on characters who are socially excluded with the aim of representing the conflict between individuals and prejudiced society. Joe Christmas, the main character, is a victim of interpersonal contradictions struggling for social acceptance. Moreover, the novel demonstrates how a corrupt system has a devastating effect on social circles. In this novel, the system's foundation is based on a social mechanism of racial division. We are all different as humans, and we are doomed to fail in our fight against an order based on these differences. We deny our ability to be creative and fertile by rejecting them. Faulkner is also one of the writers who employs stream of consciousness technique in his novels, alongside James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. *Light in August* is a novel that recollects Faulkner's past, trying to expose characters' lives. It's about the outcasts who attempt to be compatible with the society in their

own way. Trauma Theory is inextricably linked to Southern ideologies, particularly white male Southern ideology. The book delves into the concepts of blackness and whiteness, which are opposed. Joe Christmas's inner identity and trauma are revealed through such contrasts. His loneliness, opposition to reality, attempts to live according to his nature, and love for a woman that he is unable to win despite their sexual relationship, turn him into a tragic character. According to the present analysis, rewriting the South can reveal Faulkner's trauma as well as his extreme obsession with the Southern myth and regional discourse.

#### References:

- Ahmed, N. H. M., & Ahmed, M. A. "The Trends of Stream of Consciousness Technique in William Faulkner's Novels" *European Academic Research* 4.3 (2016): 2543-2561.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. "Toward a theory of Cultural Trauma". *Cultural and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 1-30.
- Brooks, Cleanth. *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*. New York: Yale UP, 1976.
- Jehlen, Myra. *Class and Character Faulkner's South*. New York: Columbia UP, 1976.
- Faulkner, William. *Light in August*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Bush, Laura. "A Very American Power Struggle: The Color of Rape in *Light in August*". Starkville: *The Mississippi Quarterly* (1998).
- Forster, Greg. "Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form". *Narrative* 15.3 (2007): 259-285.
- Hickman, Alicia. "An examination of Race and Gender in *Light in August*". Jacksonville: Stetson University, 2008.
- Hoefer, Anthony Dyer. *Apocalypse South: Judgment, Cataclysm and Resistance in the Regional Imaginary*. Columbus: The Ohio State University, 2012.
- Honninghausen, Lothar. *Faulkner: Masks and Metaphors*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997.
- Nelson, Lisa K. "Masculinity, Menace and American Mythologies of Race in Faulkner's Anti-Heroes". *The Faulkner Journal* 19.2 (2004): 49-68.
- Singal, Daniel. J. William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist Identity. "The Making of a Modernist Identity: *Light in August*". Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997.
- Smelser, Neil. J. "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma". *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Los Angeles: University of California, 2004.
- ISHIKAWA, K. "The Problem of Search for Identity in *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*". *Journal of the Nagoya Women's College* 32 (1986): 263-269.
- Tamura, Rika. "Voice of the South, Voice of *Light in August*". Tokyo: The University of Tokyo, 2000.
- TeKuo, By Yu. American. *South, Post Slavery Trauma, and William Faulkner's Depression Era Fiction*. Yat-sen: National Sun Yat-Sen University, 2008.
- Visser, I. "Faulkner's Mendicant Madonna: the Light of *Light in August*". *Literature and Theology* 18.1 (2004): 38-48.